

U.S. Congressman Mark Kirk is calling for tighter regulations on the discharge of wastewater into Lake Michigan after an incident in Milwaukee on Tuesday.

Officials with the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District said the 800,000-gallon discharge occurred when a new computer operating system was being tested.

Officials said they were confident the water that was discharged was safe.

“In all likelihood, (the discharge) is going to meet the definition of full treatment,” said Bill Graffin, spokesman for the district.

But Kirk blasted the district for the accident and said he would introduce federal legislation later this year that would set a date for a complete ban of dumping into Lake Michigan.

“Milwaukee’s massive sewage dumping into Lake Michigan shows that city is a poor steward of our environment,” he said. “We should find ways to upgrade Milwaukee’s sewage system in the short run.”

Kirk has bemoaned the condition of the Milwaukee sewer system before. Last year, he said, the city had dumped 4 million gallons of untreated sewage in the lake because of the limitations of its system.

“It leads to them having these accidents and overflows,” he said.

In Tuesday’s accident, 800,000 gallons of sewage bypassed one of three treatment stages at the plant when the gates of an underground channel were inadvertently opened for about 30 minutes.

Graffin said the effluent had been disinfected and the solids had been filtered out before it was discharged.

He added the district has spent billions of dollars to improve the system and that the notion of instituting zero overflows and discharges was absurd.

“If he wants to go to zero overflows to Lake Michigan that’s going to come with a huge price tag,” he said. “It’ll be interesting to see if he can come up with that kind of money.”

Kirk said it’s not impossible.

“I think we have to be practical. We do have to help Milwaukee upgrade their systems and that’s going to require a federal, state and local partnership,” he said.